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Black Print with a White Carnation

Amy Helene Forss

BLACK PRINT WITH A WHITE CARNATION

WOMEN IN THE WEST

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MILDRED BROWN AND THE *OMAHA STAR* NEWSPAPER, 1938–1989

Amy Helene Forss

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I wish to dedicate this book to family: Reba Shelton, Mildred Brown's ninety-eight-year-old "country cousin" who othermothered me as a granddaughter, and to my husband, Dave, and my daughters, Leigh, Kim, Megan, and Samantha. Their willingness to listen to me talk endlessly about Mildred Brown and their continuous supply of positive energy made this project a reality.

Vi amo.

Contents

List of Illustrations viii
List of Tables viii
Preface ix
Acknowledgments xi
Introduction 1

PART 1. Laying the Foundation

1. A Family of Fighters 21
2. Involving the Community 43
3. Politics of Respectability 59

PART 2. Ensuring Her Success

4. Working within Her Space 83
5. Collective Activism and the De Porres Club 101
6. Restricted Housing and 'Rithmetic 123

PART 3. Transferring Ownership to the Community

7. Changing Strategies for Changing Times 143
8. The Death of an Icon 165

Notes 179
Bibliography 211
Index 233

Illustrations

Following page 114

1. Mildred Brown in front of the *Omaha Star* building
2. Mayor Mike Boyle presenting plaque to Mildred Brown
3. Somerville Courthouse, Somerville, Alabama
4. Louisville and Nashville Railroad Company train station
5. Miles Memorial College, Fairfield, Alabama
6. Malone AME Church, Sioux City, Iowa
7. Downtown Omaha, Nebraska, circa 1900
8. Lynching death of Will Brown
9. Intersection of Twenty-Fourth and Lake Streets
10. *Omaha Star* newspaper carriers
11. Mildred Brown's business card
12. Mildred Brown in her *Omaha Star* home
13. Mildred Brown in her *Omaha Star* office
14. Father Markoe and Mildred Brown
15. Jewell Building, northern Omaha
16. President Lyndon Baines Johnson and Mildred Brown
17. The Near North Side neighborhood burning
18. Littleton Alston's bust of Mildred Brown
19. Mildred Brown standing between images of her mother and father

Tables

1. Nonwhite-white segregation indices by year 160

Preface

Over the past two centuries several dozen black women have improved the newspaper business, but very few of their accomplishments reside in monographs. This book is a step toward rectifying their overlooked situation. It examines the historic life of Mildred Dee Brown, cofounder, owner, publisher, and editor of the *Omaha Star* newspaper, while telling the story of her times. Through the use of more than 150 oral histories, black weeklies and a few dailies, and documents from city, state, and federal levels of government, this book builds on and contributes to previous studies of African American and women's history. Brown's strong family background; deliberate involvement with the black community in Omaha, Nebraska; usage of the politics of respectability; knowledge through practical application and formal education; community collective activism; racial solidarity; and ability to change strategies ensured her status and her newspaper's longevity in the city's black enclave. During Brown's fifty-one-year tenure with the *Omaha Star*, she successfully challenged racial discrimination, unfair employment practices, restrictive housing covenants, the segregated public school system, and a freeway dividing the minority neighborhood. The Near North Side's matriarch, with her trademark white carnation corsage, was an iconic leader, and her legacy, the *Omaha Star*, continues as a source of racial uplift for Omaha's black community.

Acknowledgments

The adage it takes a village to raise a child is also true for a book. I started with Mildred Brown: I visited her grave, formally introduced myself, and asked for her permission to do this project. Then I contacted her relatives, who were scattered throughout the United States. They extended courtesies to me far surpassing Mildred's southern hospitality roots. I cannot say thank you enough to her great-nephews Andrew Battiste and William Brown; her nephew Bennie Drew Brown Jr.; her cousins David Winton, Druella Borders, and William Taylor Breeding for their mental and physical guided tours; her ex-husband's son, Shirl Edward Gilbert II, and daughter, Rosalyn Gilbert; her othermothered son, Marvin Kellogg Sr.; and grandsons, Marvin Kellogg Jr., Dale Kellogg, and Kenneth Kellogg; sister-in-laws Catherine Phillips and Harriet Hannah; and nieces Kathryn Battiste and Marguerita Washington. Their familial stories and reminiscences of Mildred gave me a fairly good idea of her.

But Mildred, also known as Miss Brown and to a special few as Millie, was a complicated woman. It took more than 150 interviews to reconstruct her. Many of the interviewees were in their seventies, eighties, and nineties, but they graciously spoke with me for hours at a time and shared their memories, photographs, diaries, and, of course, *Omaha Star* newspaper clippings. The North Omaha cooperation was substantial, and I need to thank several people individually, such as Rudy Smith, Matt Holland, Robert Armstrong, Archie Godfrey, Buddy Hogan, David Mason, Warren Taylor, Tommie Wilson, Mary Green Parks, La Veeda Banks, and Cathy Hughes, for consenting to multiple interviews; to give a heartfelt hug to Bertha Calloway,

Robert Samuels, Gwen Foxall, Royce Keller, Shirley Harrison, Katherine Fletcher, Bob Rodgers, and Korea Stowdarski for inviting me into their homes and lives; to acknowledge the factual and spiritual guidance from Reverends Reynolds, Vavrina, McSwain, McCaslin, McCullough, and Menyweather-Woods; and to offer an upward posthumous thanks to retired attorney Truman Clare for unraveling pages of Douglas County Courthouse legal jargon with me. I could not have accomplished this book without each named person and the trust and assistance of many others, such as academic mentors Drs. Margaret Jacobs and Harl Dalstrom; archivists John Allison, Joellen ElBashir, Gary Rosenberg, Gordon Rieber, and Les Valentine; Metropolitan Community College's Randy Schmailzl, Jane Franklin, Dennis Smith, Edie Sample, Jim Van Arsdall, Art Durand, Mary Lyons-Carmona, and Linda Milton; and University of Nebraska Press history acquisitions editor Bridget Barry for believing in my project, associate project editor Sara Springsteen for supervising it, and eagle-eyed copyeditor Susan Silver for making it a joy all over again. The community village was filled with numerous industrial and supportive residents.

BLACK PRINT WITH A WHITE CARNATION

Introduction

On June 1, 1984, Mildred Brown slowly walked onto the stage dais of the Red Lion Inn, the finest downtown hotel in Omaha, Nebraska. She looked out at the multitude of white and black citizens facing her and said, "Am I dreaming?" Standing at the podium, serenaded by the sounds of the famous Preston Love Sr. Band, she looked radiant in her scarlet red gown and shimmering silver sequined evening jacket. Her trademark oversized white carnation corsage decorated her left shoulder. Brown, the cofounder, owner, publisher, and editor of the *Omaha Star* black newspaper, was the honored guest of 470 residents of the city of Omaha, most of whom were from northern Omaha, better known as the Near North Side. Harold Andersen, the white editor of the mainstream *Omaha World-Herald* newspaper, and Ben Gray, a local black television talk show host, served as the dinner's emcees. The men introduced each other to the interracial crowd. Gray incorrectly introduced Harold Andersen as Harold Washington, who at that time was Chicago's current and first black mayor. Andersen covered Gray's faux pas with a clever quip. He asked the television reporter if he wanted to meet his wife, Marian Andersen, as in Marian Anderson, the black operatic singer. The audience responded with a few nervous chuckles and laughs. Brown's former second husband, Noel Maximilian "Max" Brownell; her brother Bennie Brown Sr.; her nephew Bennie Brown Jr.; and her niece Marguerita Washington nodded approvingly at the head table. Ruth Harris Kellogg, Brown's beloved foster daughter, was not present; she had died seven months prior to the festive event. Her voice would not be among the videotaped speeches or thirty-five minutes of individual tributes to Brown.

Mayor Mike Boyle joined Brown at the podium and presented her with a "key to the city" plaque. The award added one more accolade to the 150 awards she had amassed during her lifetime. After the applause died down and the crowd started to disperse, Bennie Brown Jr. stood up from his chair and strode out of the hotel that Saturday evening, "impressed that his aunt was so highly thought of in Omaha."[1]

Brown was not just respected by the residents of Omaha; she was also the black matriarch of Omaha's Near North Side, the historically black part of town. She used her newspaper, the *Omaha Star*, as an activist tool to provide a voice for the black community and to conduct diplomatic forms of communication between the black and white residents of Omaha. For more than fifty years Brown and the *Star*, which most citizens of Omaha saw as synonymous, sought to uplift the black community with positive weekly news and successfully challenged racial discrimination, unfair employment practices in North Omaha, restrictive housing covenants, Omaha's public segregated school system, and the city's urban renewal. The iconoclastic female leader accomplished this impressive feat by nurturing, challenging, and speaking for her black readership from the moment she cofounded the *Omaha Star* on July 9, 1938, until the minute she died on November 2, 1989.

Posthumously, Mildred Brown holds the record for operating the longest running black newspaper founded by a black woman in the United States. This is an even more amazing feat when considering that all the other twentieth century's black women newspaper owners inherited their weeklies from their husbands. Today, what she referred to as "my paper" remains the only black newspaper in the state of Nebraska. Brown accomplished her lifetime feat as a result of a strong family foundation and through a variety of strategies: deliberately engaging with the black community, employing the politics of respectability, learning business through practical application and education, supporting community collective activism, encouraging racial solidarity, and changing strategies to fit the times. Her story illustrates a larger history dating from the nineteenth-century era of

Reconstruction and Jim Crow to the twentieth century's Great Migration, World Wars I and II, the Red Scare, the civil rights and black power movements, desegregation, and urban renewal. This project offers an examination of African American history during a century of political and social events and an overall view of the impact of the black press through a black newspaper woman's narrative.

Mildred Brown's story begins with her interracial common-law family in nineteenth-century Morgan County, Alabama. William and Sopharina Breeding, Mildred's great-grandparents, had witnessed the end of slavery, the reintegration of eleven former Confederate states into the Union, and the ratification of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. But as an interracial couple, they knew that the federal guarantee of black citizenship and voting rights for black men did not permit them to marry in Alabama. While mixed "race" relationships were not uncommon in the South, many white Americans "believed that interracial marriage was unnatural" and "assumed that the marriage of one white man to one white woman was the only kind of marriage worthy of the name." Therefore, most white Americans did not question antimiscegenation laws banning interracial marriages between 1864 and 1967. But plenty of white men ran afoul of miscegenation laws. Their troubles did not happen while they were cohabitating with black women, but after they died. Most twentieth-century white Alabamans would have labeled Rev. Millard Breeding an "illegitimate Negro," but Brown's grandfather insisted in the successful 1899 *Breeding v. Breeding* court case that because he and his three brothers were the progeny of William Breeding, a white southern plantation owner, and Sopharina, an enslaved black woman, they were the rightful heirs to his property. The antimiscegenation laws that caused the trial became the core of Jim Crow, a center from which "a multitude of prohibitions and regulation radiated outward."[2]

State and local segregation statutes, also known as Jim Crow laws, encouraged racism by separating public transportation, churches, schools, housing, employment, and even cemeteries. Millard Breeding and his brothers, who inherited their father's property, became

part of the black upper-middle class, but like every other person of color, they were forced to abide by segregation. These laws were not intended for the black person's protection and safeguarding but as a source of oppression and humiliation. The Thirteenth Amendment disallowed slavery, but post-Reconstruction segregation reinforced the daily reminder of strict containment and control of black Americans. Once the U.S. Supreme Court's *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision validated segregation's discriminatory practices as "separate but equal," it eroded the rights blacks gained during Reconstruction. Southern states exacerbated the inequality by devising a number of means to disenfranchise black people.[3]

Voiceless and disfranchised, black Americans, 90 percent of whom lived in the South in 1900, actively changed their lives by moving north during the Great Migration. According to the federal government statistic table in *Negroes in the United States*, the total number of black Americans living in the South was 1.9 million, and of this group approximately 1 million people migrated to the North and 300,000 relocated to the West. Between 1900 and 1930 this first wave of the Great Migration's rural families, including Mildred Brown and her family, migrated primarily for political equality and partially because of crop failures causing employment declines. By the time of the Great Depression, cotton crops were no longer yielding profits for two-thirds of the southern black farmers, cash tenants, and sharecroppers, which prompted another half a million southern migrants to move to the northern promised land of employment opportunities. The massive national movement was avidly supported by the black press. Urban black daily and weekly newspapers offered the key to relocation. The *Chicago Defender*, the *Baltimore Afro-American*, and the *Pittsburgh Courier* encouraged, cajoled, and demanded that their black southern readers go north and prosper. Black newspaper publishers were convinced that northern cities were the solution for the oppressed black citizen; the metropolis was the black person's land of opportunity.[4]

The northern black migrant worker replaced the previously unlimited supply of European immigrants working as unskilled and cheap

laborers. The federal government's 1917 Immigration Act, enacted the same year as the Espionage Act, "safeguarded" the American population by curtailing much of European immigration with its literacy test and the exclusion of most Asians and Pacific Islanders. The older generation of naturalized Americans were now serving overseas as soldiers in World War I. Hundreds of northern factories, stockyards, and railroad companies dispatched agents to recruit black laborers from the South. In 1919, at the end of the Great War, Chicago's average black worker was earning forty-eight cents an hour. It was a wage unheard of in the Deep South. The passing of the 1924 National Origins Act established strict immigration quotas, which created another larger wave of the Great Migration. In the 1940s and extending to the end of the 1970s, a second Great Migration of almost 5 million blacks migrated from the South to the North. Approximately 1.5 million people left southern states for better employment during the World War II years, and another 3.5 million black Americans moved seeking political empowerment during the civil rights and black power movements and the urban renewal years of the 1960s and 1970s. The first and second Great Migrations resulted in the proletarianization and urbanization of black Americans.[5]

When Mildred Brown and Dr. Shirley Edward Gilbert, her first husband, relocated from Alabama to the Midwest, the regions had already witnessed the largest influx of southern migrants participating in the Great Migration. Brown, a certified teacher, and her PhD-educated, middle-class husband wanted more opportunities than were available to them in the South. Her husband was one of less than 1 percent of black doctors in the United States. The movement of rural black Americans into U.S. cities caused some of the country's worst outbreaks of violence. Black migrants living in Omaha, and most other black residents of large Midwest towns, were eyewitnesses to the backlash against the first wave of migrants. The nadir of violence against migrants occurred during the so-called Red Summer of 1919, aptly named by Harlem Renaissance "father" James Weldon Johnson to pertain to the multiple incidences of bloodshed in Washington DC, East St. Louis, Chicago, Knoxville,

and Omaha and not to refer to the federal government's first Red Scare looking for black and white Americans joining the "red" communist Industrial Workers of the World.[6]

Twenty-six race riots occurred during the Red Summer's months of violence, and one of the worst was in Omaha. William Brown, a black meatpacking worker (who was no relation to Mildred Brown), became a lynching victim after he allegedly raped white nineteen-year-old Agnes Loebeck. Victor Rosewater, the white *Omaha Bee* editor and publisher, explained Brown's "crime" in an article titled "Black Beast First Sticks-Up Couple." City of Omaha readers learned how a crowd of angry white citizens surrounded the recently constructed two-million-dollar Douglas County courthouse where Brown was being held and forcibly removed him. During the fateful evening of September 28, 1919, William Brown died a brutal death. A skeleton crew of police officers attempted to stop his demise, and Maj. Gen. Leonard Wood, former commander of the Rough Riders and chief of staff of the U.S. Army, led a battalion of national guardsmen to Omaha, but they arrived too late. Riddled with more than a thousand bullets, Brown's corpse swung from a telephone pole at Eighteenth and Harney Streets. Hours later his murderers dragged his body through the city streets, burned his torso, and then, with cigars in hand, posed for pictures.[7] Lynching, by definition, is a hanging without a trial. Despite white rationales, lynching was not a random act of violence perpetrated by crazed vigilantes. Racist whites "homed in on [alleged] rape as the ultimate expression of the blacks' supposed incapacity for self-control." The barbaric, almost carnival-like ritual of lynching supplied sadistic whites with the necessary means of supposedly protecting white womanhood while instilling fear in the black community for threatening their white social, political, and economic manhood.[8]

Despite the fact that the *Omaha Monitor*, the city's sole black newspaper during this decade, denounced Will Brown's murder by printing the circumstances of the meat packer's demise and the destruction of the mob rioting, it only vaguely hinted at the involvement of Tom Dennison, Omaha's political boss. Orville Menard's *Political Bossism*

in Mid-America, written in 1989, validated what the black and white population in Omaha had already known for years, even though few were bold enough to voice their opinions. It was not uncommon in postwar United States for conservative Democrats, like Dennison, to cause riots for political reasons, especially when it meant convincing an ignorant public to vote for machine candidates. The racist Jim Crow attitudes prevalent in the early twentieth century allowed Dennison, and men like him, to get away with orchestrated violence.

Major General Wood, whose soldiers stood on guard at Twenty-Fourth and Lake Streets following the riot, blamed Brown's grisly death on the communist elements of the "Industrial Workers of the World and its red flag," although the U.S. Army concluded that Brown's murder "was a lynching not a race riot." In the aftermath of Brown's demise, Omaha's black population relocated from the city's downtown and southern stockyard areas to the isolated, safer confines of the European Jewish neighborhood in North Omaha. The southern end of the Near North Side's Twenty-Fourth and Lake Streets became a thriving segregated community.[9]

Racial tensions continued to flare over employers hiring black men for menial labor jobs in the 1920s. Black men in Omaha gained employment with large industrial outfits, such as Union Pacific railroad yards, Philip D. Armour, Gustavus Swift, Michael Cudahy's meatpacking plants, and William Paxton and John A. Creighton's Union Stock Yard Company. Omaha's African Americans laborers, similar to minority workers in other urban cities, were "used as scabs, or strikebreakers, to force mostly [European] immigrant laborers to accept low wages and grueling working conditions." This volatile situation only increased the mounting racial tension. White workers living in the city of Omaha resented their fellow black workers, regardless if they were temporary or full-time. The upshot of the economically hostile situation was residential segregation.[10]

Housing became a chief means of "controlling black spatial mobility and fostering segregation as blacks migrated en masse to cities" during the World War I years. Home-owner covenants and the National

Association of Real Estate Boards developed five patterns of residential segregation to ensure the races did not mix: all-white and all-black blocks, legalized housing segregation through city council districts, designated neighborhoods by the majority of residents, segregation by ownership rights, and occupancy through home-owner associations. The Federal Housing Administration forced subdivision contractors and home builders between 1935 to 1937 to comply with race-restrictive guidelines, thereby endorsing racist state actions. The practice of redlining, a banking practice in which loan officers denied individuals mortgage applications based on their skin color or the racial composition of the neighborhood in which they wished to buy a home, was prevalent in the neighborhoods surrounding the Near North Side of Omaha. This isolated urban black community needed a public champion and a voice to fight for its rights. A local black press would provide it.[11]

National black newspapers fought against racism and discrimination in the 1930s and 1940s with nationwide consumer campaigns, such as Ira Kemp's "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" boycotts and "Spend Your Money Where You Can Work" campaigns. Through the coordination of the black press, minority communities realized their racial spending power in New York City and then in other participating cities, including Omaha. Buying power became black America's leverage for equality and inclusion. Selective-patronage campaigns forced white businesses to comply with fair employment practices. Mildred Brown understood the importance of these types of nonviolent economic strategies. Her uncle, Andrew Cato Brown, was the founder of the Colored Merchant's Association in Birmingham, Alabama. The association successfully established black grocery chain stores in Birmingham, Dallas, New York, Richmond, Detroit, Chicago, and Omaha from the 1920s to 1936. The key to these competitive stores was cooperative buying and group advertising. The Alabama-based association served as a model for potential black professional advancement in every neighborhood. White businesses began to see urban black consumers as financially noteworthy individuals. African

American city dwellers were no longer just considered poor migrants; they were the future black middle class. Collective spending, or lack of spending during a boycott, demonstrated the black community's regional and nationwide power.[12]

The *Pittsburgh Courier* started its successful Double V campaign on February 7, 1942. Brown, who always wanted the *Star* to be a maverick press like the *Pittsburgh Courier*, joined other black weeklies and her competitor, the *Omaha Guide*, in the campaign. World War II's Double V campaign created an instance of national black solidarity through the black press. Angered by the simultaneous hypocrisy of fighting fascism abroad while fighting racism at home, James G. Thompson, a black cafeteria employee in Wichita, Kansas, wrote a letter titled "Should I Sacrifice to Live Half American" to the *Pittsburgh Courier* newspaper. It became the most famous black editorial of the twentieth century. Thompson challenged other *Pittsburgh Courier* readers to accept Roosevelt's Double V campaign, but instead of the double Vs the president alluded to, as in victory in war and victory in the 1944 election, Thompson suggested his double Vs stand for "victory over our enemies abroad . . . and victory over our enemies from within." Each edition of Brown's newspaper carried the Double V emblem in the top right-hand corner of the front page. While black communities throughout the United States applauded the newspaper campaign against military subjugation, the loyalty of Brown and other black participants in the "crusading" or "fighting" press, as the minority dailies and weeklies became known during this time, concerned the government.[13]

The U.S. Justice Department, led by FBI director John Edgar Hoover, responded to the Double V campaign. Thomas Borstelmann's *The Cold War and the Color Line* describes Hoover as "a fierce anti-Communist and a segregationist of well-known racial prejudice." Hoover deliberately launched a nationwide investigation of black press editors, such as the *Pittsburgh Courier*'s Percival Prattis, the *Chicago Defender*'s John Sengstacke, and the *Omaha Star*'s Mildred Brown. Her FBI file, like those of her journalist contemporaries, numbered in

the thousands of pages, but she ignored the federal agents watching her business and continued running the *Star* in a professional manner. Eight government agencies routinely investigated rumors of subversive black newspapers: the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Justice Department, Post Office, Office of Facts and Figures, Office of Censorship, Office of War Information, U.S. Army, and the War Production Board. The government agencies threatened the freedom of the black press by indicting several smaller black newspapers for war violations and revoking their second-class postage permits, which were necessary for sending newspapers through the country's mail. Hoover's sting operation involved almost every black newspaper, including the *Omaha Guide* and *Omaha Star* weeklies. Using words such as espionage, sedition, and suppression, agents reported any inconsistencies in the newspapers or possible affiliations with the American Communist Party. Black nationalist leaders, including W. E. B. Du Bois, encouraged the wartime Double V effort and did not demand the black press issue a "close ranks" retraction like he did during World War I. In the FBI Hoover soon realized he could push the matter only so far, especially since thirteen million people of color might turn against the U.S. war efforts abroad. It was not until after World War II ended that the FBI director and the federal government realized the enormity of change possible. A new generation of blacks who were no longer willing to tolerate segregation, lack of voting rights, and other indignities would eventually desegregate the United States. However, the black press first became the target of anti-Communist reactionaries.[14]

During the Red Scare in the 1950s, the House Un-American Activities Committee worked hard to undermine and discredit integrationist associations by attempting to paint them "red." Hoover, the previous mastermind of the first Red Scare during and after World War I, again chose to monitor the black press. Whether or not the weeklies and dailies were considered radical "depended more on the fears, stereotypes, and prejudices of agents and bureaucrats" than the black press's editorial content. The American Communist Party did attract some black nationalist and desegregation activists because its

antiracist agenda rejected gradualism and publicly fought for black equal rights. But few black leaders, such as socialist A. Philip Randolph, encouraged joining the Soviet-based political party; Randolph disagreed with the party's ideological conformity and strict discipline regime. Whatever their position on communism, every black leader agreed something had to be done on a nationwide level to uplift the American black community.[15]

The national black community was assisted by numerous northern Catholics in its fight against segregation in the late 1940s. The anti-Catholic prejudice, which had once fueled Ku Klux Klan membership rolls, had dissipated after World War II, and much like the Euro-American Jewish immigrant population, Euro-American Catholics had enough ethnic white privilege to challenge their segregation. Northern Catholic congregants had empathy for the black neighborhood because they had experienced xenophobic discrimination and limited opportunities of menial employment. These naturalized Catholics eventually assimilated, acculturated, bought homes in low-income and working-class parishes, and, according to church canon law, "served all souls living within its [parish] boundaries." Catholic home owners tended to permanently stay within their parishes, even with the encroachment of the black community. Interaction between the two minority communities was inevitable. It was not surprising that the Catholic archdiocese, which had an association with Brown, constructed Saint Benedict the Moor Parish and High School one block north of the *Omaha Star* office. The *Star* publisher's connection with Father Edward Flanagan's Catholic Boys Town home and school was established in the 1930s when she contacted the Jesuit priest about caring for several black Omaha youths. The new school building became necessary after the Near North Side's black Catholic students were denied membership in white Omaha parishes. The archdiocese viewed Saint Benedict's as only a "social segregation," a temporary situation in which the community's black Catholics were more comfortable in isolation but still regarded by the church as equals. It was not unusual for priests, such as Father James Groppi in Milwaukee and Father John

Markoe in Omaha, to align with local black leaders and fight against deliberate segregation. Markoe's interracial De Porres Club along with Brown's *Star* embarked on a grassroots movement for fair employment in Omaha's black neighborhood. The two entities staged successful boycotts, sit-ins, and picketing ten years before the national civil rights movement.[16]

The countrywide fight for civil rights was made easier after the Supreme Court ruled in 1954 that "separate but unequal" educational facilities were unconstitutional in the *Brown v. Board of Education, Topeka, Kansas* decision. Within one year, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and his wife, Coretta Scott King, who was a close friend of Brown's, were leading the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955. No documentation exists to show a possible connection between the Alabama protest and Brown's earlier successful 1952–54 bus boycott in Omaha, but her picketing rhetoric and organizational style were strikingly similar to those later used by the Kings. It would be hard not to recall the famous photograph of King and the white reverend Glenn Smiley being greeted by the white bus driver's "we are glad to have you" smile as they sat side by side on December 21, 1956. King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Committee of Racial Equality, which Brown joined and became a prominent Omaha member, were already committed to civil rights several years prior to the southern black sit-ins of the early 1960s. From these associations came the roots of other activism, which resulted in the Civil Rights Act of 1957, the first piece of civil rights legislature passed since the Civil Rights Act of 1875. It supposedly protected the constitutional rights of voters, but violence caused by city and state police and the Ku Klux Klan, which had a solid history in twentieth-century Nebraska, kept most blacks from voting at the polls. Indeed, several black activists, including Medgar Evers, died trying to uphold the legislation.[17] Frustration with the national challenges of protecting bludgeoned freedom riders and the bloodied protestors at the Edmund Pettus Bridge outside of Selma, Alabama, led President Lyndon Baines Johnson to demand on national television that Congress pass a national voting rights act:

"We have already waited a hundred years and more since equality was promised . . . and the time for waiting is gone."[18] Johnson's attempt at staving off a militant civil rights confrontation was an excellent start, but it was inadequate.

The subsequent rise of the black power movement in the mid to late 1960s awakened the dormant ties of black radicalism and black separatism. Black power provided an outlet for the frustrated urban black American man through black masculine ideology. It did not promote black women's leadership. Mildred Brown's status in the Omaha black community was sorely tested during this time. Even Gloria Richardson, a longtime national African American civil rights protestor, "experienced the wrath of the new male activists" when she was labeled as a castrator of black men. Many Americans, black and white, agreed with Daniel Moynihan's sociological report, *The Negro Family*, which contended that black matriarchal women, like Brown, were responsible for the poverty experienced by the black community. These women supposedly marginalized black men. According to this theory, the black matriarch was responsible for the emasculated angry black man fighting for his civil rights. Huey Newton and Bobby Seale's Black Panther Party for Self-Defense encouraged the black male domination of civil rights by having members read Mao Tse-tung's *Little Red Book* and reciting the philosophies of Karl Marx, Frantz Fanon, Che Guevara, and Malcolm X, who originated in Omaha. The party emphasized "self-determination, community empowerment, and separatism," while rejecting the mainstream ideals of white middle-class society and the nonviolent strategies practiced by interracial civil rights organizations. Hoover labeled the organization and its philosophies "the greatest threat to the internal security of the country." His words proved prophetic, but not because of its militant stance.[19]

It was a case of frustrated and bitter black Americans reacting with violence to the slow pace of progress toward racial equality. Between 1965 and 1969 there were hundreds of disturbances and approximately 150 riots in cities throughout the United States. One of these race rebellions amounted to the worst destruction in black Omaha's history. It

was the Red Summer of 1919 in reverse. Instead of white mobs attacking black businesses, black mobs ransacked white stores. "Pictures of flaming cities, looting and embattled mobs, and smoking ruins were regularly featured in newspapers and on television." The rioters in cities like Omaha were frustrated with pent-up desire for civil rights and the American Dream. Retail stores, the inescapable daily reminder of ghetto residents' economic deprivation, suffered a much greater proportion of damage. Looting and burning of white businesses operating in the black neighborhood gave rioters the chance to destroy credit ledgers as well. The National Negro Business League, which originally included one of Mildred Brown's relatives, absolved the rioters by saying it was "naive for anyone to expect the very poorest of the American poor to remain docile and content in their poverty." While Brown agreed with similar sentiments concerning residents of northern Omaha's minority population, she disagreed with the actions of the national black community and refused to print articles on civil disorder and destruction.[20] President Johnson, who visited with Mildred Brown four times at the White House during the turbulent 1960s, created the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders to answer three questions: "What happened? Why did it happen? What can be done to prevent it from happening again?"[21] The Kerner Report, published five months earlier than expected due to the urgency of the situation, concluded that the United States was dividing into two separate but unequal white and black societies because white racism had racially divided the country.[22]

Congress responded to the Kerner Report by passing the Fair Housing Act and the Housing and Urban Development Act of 1968. The latter act completed what the Housing Act of 1949 began by rehabilitating older housing and creating twenty-six million public housing units. The promise of new housing only partially alleviated the frustration of the black community. The Federal Housing Administration invested in black and racially mixed neighborhoods, but urban city developers still viewed the black population as a poor investment. The massive public housing projects created in every major city became Trojan gift horses by the 1960s. Omaha, with its dilapidated federal

housing projects, was no exception. Years of discriminatory employment and restrictive covenants resulted in Near North Side black residents living in decaying communities. Brown referred to the projects as "the dagger in the heart of north Omaha." The U.S. Supreme Court's *Shelley v. Kraemer* previously decided restrictive covenants were illegal in 1948, but it seemed to make no difference. The Federal Housing Administration created a "hierarchy of neighborhoods" where many blacks hoped to buy homes, but few realized their dreams until the 1970s or 1980s.[23]

While the number of black suburbanites doubled during the 1970s and 1980s as minority residents moved into previously denied neighborhoods, segregation persisted in the schools. The city of Omaha, similar to most major cities in the United States, was still ignoring the federal desegregation mandate. After all, the 1954 *Brown* decision addressed only public school systems, and its "all deliberate speed" enforcement lacked the urgency of serious legislation. It was not until the Supreme Court's 1974 *Miliken v. Bradley* decision that the battle against educational segregation ended. The Omaha public school system, forced by legal mandate, desegregated schools, staff, and student body in 1976. Norbert Schuerman, head of the Omaha school desegregation task force, commended Brown and her *Star* for supporting him and thus streamlining the process for the black community. But as Michael Harrington concludes in *The Other America*, it was possible "to have a public policy for integrated schooling, but if the school districts [were] themselves a product of residential discrimination," the schools continued as Jim Crow constructions anyway, even when the federal government said otherwise.[24]

In the 1970s and 1980s federal construction projects, such as the national urban-redevelopment projects, nicknamed "Negro removal" by the black community, replaced slums and areas considered unfit for human habitation. But the newly created schools and expressways ultimately divided black neighborhoods because the primary concern in most larger mainstream cities was to rebuild, not to help unemployed black citizens. In the late 1970s employment plummeted in

mass-production industries, such as the auto industry, the stockyards, and the railroads. The same western Sun Belt, northern Rust Belt, and midwestern Corn Belt employment opportunities that had enticed the participants of the Great Migration disappeared as factories moved away from urban central business districts and relocated in the suburbs of cities. The National Urban League's *The State of Black America*, an annual "state of the black union" address, pronounced 1989, the same year Mildred Brown died, as a challenging but surmountable year. It marked another year in the black community's constant struggle against racism and denied opportunities, but the black population was keeping its eye on the prize by seeking equality and inclusion in every sector of American life.[25]

While Mildred Brown's great-grandparents lived through the late nineteenth century's Reconstruction and the beginning of the Jim Crow laws, she lived through the modern litany of twentieth-century markers from the Great Migration to urban renewal. The eight chapters of this monograph chronologically explore her role in these events while answering the question of how she maintained the success of her black newspaper, the *Omaha Star*, despite over half a century's worth of racial turbulence.

Chapter 1 examines Brown's ancestral family in Alabama. Because her nonconformist great-grandparents and activist grandfather achieved financial stability through Alabama's court system, their descendants, which included Brown's parents, siblings, and herself, benefited from class privileges and, in particular, the gift of higher education. Brown's marriage to Dr. Shirley Edward Gilbert, a black physician, solidified her middle-class status in the black community. Chapter 2 focuses on Mildred Brown Gilbert's successful participation in the Great Migration. She and her husband first migrated to Chicago, Des Moines, and Sioux City. While they resided in this latter northern Iowa city, the Gilberts created the *Silent Messenger* black newspaper for their fellow black congregants at the Malone African Methodist Episcopalian Church. From Sioux City the couple, with their informally adopted daughter, Ruth Harris, moved to Omaha in

1937. As a couple they founded the *Omaha Star* newspaper in 1938. The Gilberts' church, political, and community involvement connected them to the black neighborhood, which in turn boded well for the longevity of the *Star*. Chapter 3 provides an analysis of Mildred Brown through the positive persona of the black matriarch. As a newly divorced woman, Brown continued mothering her daughter and the office staff while acting as the protector of the black community. She built her gendered credibility through the politics of respectability, higher education, and networking with the black male leaders of the Near North Side and white administrators in the city of Omaha. Chapter 4 explores the origination of the national black press and the National Negro Press Association and recounts the history of Omaha's black newspapers and black male publishers. It discusses the role of gender and politics in the newspaper industry. Brown's usage of the *Star* as a tool of positive reporting and racially uplifting articles on the "awareness of self-presentation" provided black migrants and established residents with a sense of economic possibility and physical freedom. Deportment advice columns and excerpts from black etiquette manuals, which were a fairly standard feature in black newspapers, taught Brown's readers that their improved appearance would demonstrate self-respect while registering collective progress and expediting social acceptance in personal and professional situations.

Chapter 5 showcases Brown's involvement with the interracial nondenominational De Porres Club. The combination of the *Star* and the club proved beneficial for northern Omaha, as the two forces successfully combated unfair employment practices and discrimination against the black population of Omaha. This chapter illustrates the Catholic connection with the black community through the strategies created by Father Markoe and Mildred Brown. Chapter 6 explores the end of Omaha's restrictive covenant housing and the desegregation of the Omaha public school system. This chapter examines Brown's gradual political shift from activist to mediator between Omaha's white administration and the local black male dominated organizations in northern Omaha. Chapter 7 focuses on the psychology of Omaha's

three race riots in 1966, 1967, and 1969. It demonstrates Brown's strategy adjustments as she worked with white and black administrators to promote a better life for black Omahans. She challenged the black stereotypical imagery created in the *Omaha World-Herald*, the city's sole mainstream daily newspaper, while maintaining the *Star*'s invaluable asset of positive news and informed communication during the open housing crisis and the expressway's division of the black community.[26] Chapter 8 concerns Brown's last years and her decision not to name her successor. It discusses her death and funeral and reflects on her local and political achievements as well as the continuation of her and her newspaper's legacy.

The *Omaha Star* remains Mildred Brown's legacy to the Near North Side of Omaha, Nebraska. It continues to uphold her personal motto: "Dedicated to the service of the people that NO good cause shall lack a champion and that evil shall not go unopposed."[27] As one of the few black newspaper women in the United States printing a black newspaper spanning a half century's worth of human events, Brown occupied a unique historical position. In the 1960s the Kerner Commission concluded that "the world that [mainstream] newspaper and television portray is almost totally white, in both appearance and attitude . . . as if Negroes do not read the newspapers or watch television, give birth, marry, die, and go to PTA meetings."[28] Mildred Brown, the stylish black activist who always wore a white carnation corsage, and her *Omaha Star* documented the life history of the Near North Side black residents and fought for their civil rights.